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THE FUTURE OF ALBANIA

BY BRIG. GEN. GEORGE P. SCRIVEN, U. S. A.

Late Military Attaché at Rome

The friendlessness and isolation of Albania passed with the World War; the Adriatic storm must soon blow over, at least for a time; Paris will some day act; and from the south the hand of Greece will be withdrawn, it may be from amity; perhaps because northern Epirus is southern Albania, a spine of the sturdy Thistle of the Balkans, which none but a reckless hand would dare to grasp even if it stood alone. But Albania is no longer alone, the war has brought her friends—at least such friends as the unsophisticated rich may expect to find. But better than that, the war has brought her uplift, for who that has seen can doubt that the occupation of the Allied armies proved for all the peoples lying behind the lines that extended from the Adriatic to the shores of the Aegean sea a blessing to the countries they controlled? They were a powerful constructive force that made for good, and they left behind them works of improvement that the people of Albania, the heterogeneous names of Macedonia, and even the none too serious Greek, must forever recognize as a benefit to the Balkans and, with them, to mankind.

It is not too much to say that in Albania the greatest of the benefits conferred were brought about by the Italian. It was he who built the roads, developed the towns, gave access to the country; it was he who instructed the people, opened the schools, fed the starving; it was the Italian who established the courts, nursed the sick, helped the poor. Why should not this work of Italy be carried on in peace, as it was in war, and why should Albania and Italy now fall apart? Few even of her friends, of whom I count myself one, believe that Albanian people can yet walk alone; all must know that they require a friend and a guid-

ing hand to direct their steps along the path of progress opening before them. A guide but not a master, and one that may be released when his service ends: such a friend, indeed, as the United States proved to liberated Cuba. This, I believe, Albania will accept, and I am not alone in my belief. But the hand extended must not be a thing of steel within the velvet glove. The Schyptar will accept no master, and has never really had one. In addition, the hand extended must be light, and, when necessary, easily withdrawn, and proof of this must be as strong as truth itself. But proof of disinterested friendship is difficult to establish in the case of any country, except America, which has met the test. Yet convincing proof must be shown, and belief assured, before Albania will grasp the helping hand of any nation.

Italy, the best friend that Albania has in Europe, should ponder well this truth. A glance at the events which have occurred in the past five years in this part of the eastern Adriatic will show something of Italy's interest in Albania and of the changes that have taken place there, due, for the most part, to the presence of the Italian soldier and his influence upon a shy and difficult people, among whom he came as an undesired stranger if not as an enemy, and from whom he went a benefactor and a friend.

In the trying days of the early winter of the first year of the war, the 10th regiment of the Italian Bersaglieri received orders to take station at the bay of Valona on the Adriatic frontier of Albania; and on Christmas Day of that year this regiment passed between the rocky, grey-green slopes of Cape Luiguetta and the low outlines of the island of Sasseno, and occupied as an outpost the little fishing-village that lay on the northern shore.

Though their country was still at peace, the business of the fighting men of Italy was to extend the protecting hand of their nation over the exhausted land of Albania which had been left, after the expulsion of the inert and intolerable Turk; first as a bone of contention to its predatory neighbors, and later as a pawn in the ridiculous game of the Powers to wish upon the unwilling people the futile Prince of Wied, an inexperienced tenderfoot in the Balkans, who, after six months of useless struggle, vanished from the scene. He was followed by Essad Pasha, a native, who as President of Albania was to give tangible

form to the shadowy republic of the Schyptars. But Essad, too, quickly disappeared in the whirlwind of war that was rising over the world; the ensign displaying the double eagle of Scanderberg flew away across the hills, and Albania, suffering from a score of voiceless ills, was left forgotten and alone, a prey to the creeping Austrians from the north and to the wily followers of the Germanophile King Constantine from the south, whose advances threatened not only the life of Albania itself, but also the future of the Allied cause in the eastern theatre of war.

But the great nations of Europe, seething with war, were unable to give heed to the troubles of the little peoples, except far-seeing Italy. More watchful of the Adriatic than the other Powers, and understanding better the importance of Valona, she took up the task of meeting the menace of the Austrian and Greek, which, if allowed to go unchecked, would in the future have threatened not only the right flank of the Allies but the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, and might even have assured the definite separation of Greece from the Allied cause.

So, by the occupation of the great bay which forms the best harbor that opens through the mountains of the eastern Adriatic from the erstwhile boundaries of dissolving Austria, to the shores of the Ionian sea, Italy, with admirable if not wholly unselfish foresight, secured great future advantages for the Allies, gaining, as an immediate result, a foothold upon the Albanian coast. By so doing she saved at least the greater part of southern Albania from the Austrian and Bulgar, and in addition became a deciding factor in the ultimate success of the Balkan campaign, which appears now to have been the loose stone of the arch that upheld the German power.

By her early control of the western ends of the line of communication across the Balkans; by her support of the left flank of the Army of the Orient based on Salonica; and by her check and final defeat of the right flank of the enemy resting on the Adriatic, Italy gave the Allied forces lying eastward from the Balkan lakes freedom to operate towards the north. It is unnecessary to speak here of the value to the enemy of such roadsteads as Santi Quaranta and Porto Palermo for submarine and aerial bases, had they remained in his hands, nor of the importance of Valona as a naval base, lying as it does at the north of the

strait of Otranto and some sixty-five miles from the harbor of Brindisi. That is another story; it will suffice to say here that it will some day be recorded in the history of the World War that the world owes something to the brilliant stroke of military foresight that sent the little holding force of Bersaglieri to occupy an unheeded neutral part of the Balkan coast, there to perform the duty of watchful waiting during the trying months that held the fate of the old Triple Alliance in doubt. By this peaceful occupation of a village that was seemingly a mere squalid hamlet, a military position was secured that was later to become for the Allies an important naval station on the Adriatic, and a strategic and tactical base of such value in the operations of the armies in this theatre of war that had it fallen into the hands of the enemy earlier in the operations, the great military romance of the Balkans, if played at all, would have occupied a far smaller stage than it did, and the whole of western and southern Albania would have been thrown to the German wolves. For this and for the later treatment of the country and its peoples, it should seem that Albania, as well as the world, owes a debt of gratitude to Italy.

But be that as it may, it is sufficient here to say that as an immediate consequence of Italian action, the Austrian army was never able in this part of the front to force its way south of the Voiussa, some twelve miles from Valona; and the latter port grew from a mere hamlet into a seaport which became a great military base, as well as the center of civil administration, of food distribution, and of instruction for the Albanian people. Later it became an important factor in their regeneration and a new gateway to their country. Incidentally, too, after their terrible retreat in the autumn of 1915, Valona gave refuge to the survivors of the fugitive army of Serbia, permitted them to recover that fighting spirit which so thoroughly punished the Bulgar in the closing days of the war, and at the last offered a resting place for the bones of the Serbian dead, which the kindly Italian soldier, General Ferraro, gathered from valley and seashore to bury beneath the simple marble cross that stands today in memory of the Serbians and to the honor of the town.

With the entrance of Italy into the war in May, 1915, military activity in the Balkans increased, additional forces

were sent to Valona, and from that position as a base, Italian control was extended over southern Albania. But in this region, conditions had begun to grow more threatening on account of the attitude of Greece, still under the influence of Constantine; and as a consequence the Italian troops were advanced, but without violence and indeed at the request of the inhabitants themselves, to the interior towns, or ruins as some of them were, of Tepeleni, Argiro, Castro, Premati, and Liascoviki, and to the roadsteads of Santi Quaranta and of Porto Palermo, and the wilds of the picturesque Chimara. Indeed, owing to the unsettled state of the country, the troops went south as far as Janina in Greece, and extended the line of occupation eastward along the old Turkish highway to Ersek. Here, in February, 1917, the Italian right flank joined the left of the *Armée de l'Orient*, and a cordon of Allied troops extended from the Adriatic to the shores of the Aegean Sea.

It is of this region, opened by war and reclaimed by the soldier, that I desire to say a few words in the hope that its charm and interest may become better known than they now are. There has arisen a New Albania. Centuries of mist have hung over the hills of Albania; few strangers have looked beyond the line of its coast; the rugged country that rises behind the sea is without railroads, and, before the occupation, was practically without roads, for the infrequent highways built by the Turk had in large part become impassable for vehicles. But even had it been practicable to enter the country, it was out of the question to remain there; the people were suspicious of strangers, and frequently hostile; there were no stopping-places of a civilized kind, and, on the whole, Albania before the World War was as little known and as little sought by merchant or traveller as were the wastes of Thibet itself.

But today all this is changed. For once, the scourge of war has enlightened and improved a country, softened its inhabitants, and, in the case of the Albanians, dissipated the distrust and lessened the hatred engendered by ignorance, as well as by the ill-treatment the race has received from the floods of people that have surged around and over them, but have never submerged them. The months of military occupation have done much to atone for the dead centuries of the past, and already Albania is opening to the enterprise and curiosity of the West. But what of the

future? Surely the great work of the soldier will not be permitted to vanish unheeded, and the people will not be allowed to drop back into their age-long sleep; surely, too, the nations will see to it that the Albanians are helped along the path of civilization by a wise guidance of their affairs, and encouraged to hold fast to the friendly hands that during four years have been stretched out to assist them.

Certain it is that when the outlander comes to know the real Albania—when he sees the grandeur of its mountains, the beauty of its lakes and streams, and the charm of its old-world towns, and when, above all, he realizes the wealth of minerals lying beneath its hills the fertility of its valleys and the riches and beauty of its coasts,—the long-neglected country will come into its own.

As there has arisen from the war a new Albania, so there has been created a new entrance to the country. It is Valona, the ancient but forgotten village lying isolated at the foot of its encircling hills. In the days of the Turk, the Balkans were approached from the west, through the little sea port of Santi Quaranta, on account of the highway leading thence back into Greece and across the mountains to the Aegean Sea; or perhaps it was Durazzo, the recent Austrian base, that was considered the open door to the peninsula, since from there a Turkish road also ran east and south. Then, too, Durazzo was the starting-point of the great Via Egnatia, by which the Roman legions marched across the mountains to Elbasan, past Lake Ochrida to Konsha and to long troubled Monastir, thence southeast to pretty Vodena on the crest of the hills, whence it dropped into the valley of the Vardar and reached the shores of the Aegean Sea at Salonica, within the remains of whose ancient walls still stands a triumphal arch of Rome. Or perhaps the inlet of Porto Palermo should be reckoned an entrance to the east, since the galleys once came here for shelter, and the trace of an old road still remains nearby to tell the Roman story, or perhaps that of Caesar, whose triremes landed to the north the legions that beat the army of Pompey at far-away Pharsalia.

But however this may have been in the past the present and the future entrance to Albania from the Adriatic is Valona. So it has happened by war and by the hand of Italy that the forgotten village of Valona—or Avalona as it is sometimes called—again finds a place in the sun,

though it had long been lost, in spite of the fact that since the days of Imperial Rome the town under various names has made a dot on the maps. But notwithstanding its antiquity, on that Christmas Day five years ago the future seaport of Albania was a mere squalid fishing hamlet lying asleep in its mud and isolation on the picturesque shores of a noble bay, which then sheltered few vessels except the fishing boats and an occasional trader of the Adriatic. The place offered small attraction to the soldiers beyond a few tawdry bazaars, a mosque or two, and a collection of low dingy houses of stone, as primitive as the surrounding hills, interspersed with the better buildings of the Austrian and Greek Consulates, and the large, pretentious shell of the Vlores family, the autocrats of the place. The ill-paved streets, almost impassable from the mud of the winter rains, were animated by trains of donkeys and infrequent vehicles, and by a few Orthodox or Mohammedan peasants, who indicated by their shabby appearance the poverty and wretchedness into which the country had sunk; while an occasional woman of the latter creed moved ghostlike along her sombre way in her poor straight gown and black yashmak, which often proved a kindly screen to a withered face.

With the arrival of the soldier, however, Valona was soon cleaned up; new buildings were constructed; good water brought in; electric lights and ice-plants installed; and when peace really comes and a few hotels are built, the town will be in a fair way to become a resort of note. Rightly so; for the magnificent bay, half closed from the sea by its sentinel island, offers wonderful water for sailing and yachting; the long stretches of sandy beach lying at the foot of the olive-clad hills are excellent for bathing, while the highways behind the sea, where for many score of miles a car may run past ever-changing scenes, offer to the traveller thrills that are not often found in more sleepy lands, and provide a tonic for the nerves unsurpassed by drug or potion. Add to these things the charm of a back country full of game which is, by-the-way, little troubled by the peasant whose chief sport has been the hunt of his fellowman. But this diversion has been ended by the soldier.

Above the town, conspicuous on a headland that towers twelve hundred feet over the sea, stand in all their crumb-

ling grandeur the walls of an old Venetian castle that once guarded the harbor; and beside it there clings to the slopes the village called Kanina, a refuge of the people in the hot season. The place is approached by a fine road that was built by the soldiers literally in one night, for as the story goes, when the Italians came to Valona, the road was a mere mountain trail fit for the native and the goat. Thereupon, the general commanding, who observed the value of the place for summer quarters if only a proper road were built, remarked the fact to his chief engineer; whereupon the latter replied, "You will be able, sir, to reach Kanina in the morning by motor."

The work was done in the night, and the next day a motor road rose twelve hundred feet along the mountain side, zig-zagging like a curl of vapor to the village clinging like a bird's nest to the crags above.¹ From the castle walls the view is imposing, ranging as it does over sea and land across the wide bay to the mountains beyond, and westward out to the sheltering island that guards the harbor, while inland, above the rolling groves of olive trees, unwooded mountains open to present a vista of hills and cultivated valleys that lie along the river Sciuscizza, once crossed by lines of trenches and gun emplacements that then opposed the Austrian, and marked by the war positions of search lights and anti-air-craft guns on a dozen hills. But these have become mere memories; and again in the fields the peasant guides his plow—a crooked stick drawn by little buffaloes, and across the slopes the herds of goats and flocks of sheep graze lazily beneath the eye of the herdsman, a thing of rags and patches as variegated and primitive as his ancestors of a thousand years ago.

It is indeed a land of wonder, but a land that has been long forgotten, unheralded except for Byron's lines, and as unknown as some lost island of the tropic seas; yet a land, withal, where nature and art have joined to produce a veritable garden, where every prospect pleases, and where man is not so vile as he was once thought to be.

GEORGE P. SCRIVEN.

¹ I was told of this extraordinary bit of road-building by an officer of long service with the Italian troops in Albania during the earlier days of the occupation. I have often traveled over this road and know its quality and the skill shown in the building, but it is difficult to realize the rapidity of its construction. Nevertheless, this can be understood when it is known that the celebrated road along the Adriatic from Santi Quaranta to Valona, about eighty-two miles, was built by the Italian soldiers, aided by the people of the countryside and the Austrian prisoners, in sixty-seven days. These instances go to prove the assertion that the Italians are the best road-builders of the world.